

## Hôtel-Dieu

Organized by Francesca Fialdini, Aurora Fonda and Sandro Pignotti in A plus A Gallery



Hôtel-Dieu Paris. Nuns, nurses and patients, some of them sharing beds, 15th century.  
Mary Evan Picture Library

The name Hôtel-Dieu meant in the Middle Ages the biggest accommodation in town. It was free for the poor and the rich were asked to pay for their stay. These old European institutions were intended to host the homeless and the needy as well as travellers of any sort. Religious orders run them in a tradition of kindness. It was a place of hospitality and prayer, combined with a not so much hidden agenda of evangelization. It then also served as a hospital, but the idea of a single place reserved for medical care only, did not exist yet. You can call it a big medieval Inn, providing also housing. Only by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, admissions shifted slowly to the chronically ill exclusively. You might give a look at Michel Foucault's writings to get, a maybe more sinister, but also clearer picture of how medical institutions were established throughout time.

The philosophy of a Hôtel-Dieu, of innkeeping in the Middle Ages as well as the philosophy of a contemporary art gallery today however goes more or less like this: "The poor man is happy when the rich has his fun". And *The Boheme* — a word for the gipsies,

who in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France came mostly from Bohemia, but in semantics is referring to the lifestyle of poets and artists, who mostly were coming from the middle and upper class — *The Boheme*, is, as Walter Benjamin comments in his Paris Exile on his escape from Nazi Germany, when looking back at the European past, *The Boheme* is: “the training ground for the artistic life; it is the steppingstone to the Académie, to the Hôtel-Dieu, or to the Morgue.”<sup>i</sup>

Poor people have fashions as little as they have a history, and their ideas, their tastes were rarely tracked down or passed through the Centuries. But in a Hôtel-Dieu you surely can find a glimpse of their aesthetics. It is here where you display the photograph, the drawing, the book, the letter, the pin up poster, the one thing you could save whilst everything else got lost or was stolen from you. Maybe it’s an angel-drawing from Paul Klee, or maybe a purely random item from your former household — but it is the object that still sticks with you. It’s only in a Hôtel-Dieu where you understand the true value of beauty and things.

The Hôtel-Dieu, a place of prayer and restoration in its beginnings, disintegrated in modern times more and more into the illuminated and scientifically organized hospital on the one hand, and into a refuge for the homeless of early Industrialization on the other. It later even decayed into the shelters for the unemployed and impoverished masses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the Century prior to our current Millennium Charlie Chaplin has become the greatest Comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fear of his contemporaries — impoverishment. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was a century where there was a ban on Puppet-Theatre in Italy and a ban on Chaplin Films in the III. Reich, because every puppet could put on Mussolini’s chin and every inch of Chaplin could expose the shabbiness of the *Führer*.<sup>ii</sup>

One of these homeless shelters in which the Hôtel-Dieu decayed, while big modern hospitals were established like foretelling’s for the logistic needs of the coming World Wars, was the *Männerwohnheim* in the *Meldemannstrasse* in Vienna. “In Autumn of 1909”, Reinhold Hanisch writes in *The New Republic* in April 1939: “the neighbour on my right looked sad, and so we asked him questions. For several days he had been living on benches in the park where his sleep was often disturbed by policemen. He had landed here dead tired, hungry, with sore feet. His blue-checked suit had turned lilac. He came to Vienna in the hope of earning a living here, since he had already devoted much time to painting in Linz but had been bitterly disappointed in his hopes...The next day he was planning a new project. He had seen *The Tunnel*, a picture made from a Novel by Bernhard Kellermann, and he told me the story. An orator makes a speech in a tunnel and becomes a great popular tribune. He had success with the people in the *Männerwohnheim*, for they were always ready for fun, and he was a sort of amusement for them”.<sup>iii</sup>

“As long as there is still one beggar, there will still be myth” is another famous saying of Walter Benjamin. Looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a common thread characterized its first half: The most progressive Aesthetics for the crowds, as clearly visible in Chaplin’s gestures, or the adventures of poor Mickey Mouse and unlucky bigmouth Donald, was

completely trusting on the topos of the unemployed tramp. The disinherited and clueless masses were performing in the first half of our past Century in the allegoric Avatars of a Mouse, of a poor beggar, or of a Duck, in front of the camera, and the public was caught with liberating laughter looking in that mirror on the screen. Chaplin's and Walt Disney's aesthetics knew that the crowd instinctively understood and perceived perfectly in their flesh what systematic impoverishment means for their lives. The same was true for the regressive Aesthetics of fascism. Both Hollywood and National socialism drawn in their own way their inspirations and propellant from the fear of impoverishment, from the fear of being dismembered, diminished, left with no traditions and no identity and cut to pieces by the machinery of the *Modern Times*. The social reality was at that time for most people the life of the unemployed tramp, the reality of social injustice and the systematic unfair distribution of wealth.

History never repeats itself as already Søren Kierkegaard knew. History comes always with an interesting and surprising twist. But still today racism is not only a mental or linguistic condition. Racism is also grounded in economic realities and probably still today, like in the Weimar Republic and in almost every case in human history, a result of the systematic unfair distribution of wealth in a society over a too long period of time, a result of a methodical and unfair socialization of losses and privatization of profits. Also, civil war and war between nations is mainly grounded in these reasons. Still today the spectre haunting the Globe, is the fear of private or nationwide economic failure, the fear of mass immigration, the fear of the climate and global atmosphere changing for the worse, the fear of a strange physical and spiritual disease infecting us all in the future. And still today Art needs to play with Mythology in order to exist, and one global ambiguous myth to play with, is surely the Hôtel-Dieu. It's in these weeks, before and after Christmas 2023, that we want to dedicate an exhibition in A plus A Gallery to this myth.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 585

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Benjamin, Hitlers Diminished Masculinity. In: Selected Writings vol 2, part 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 792

<sup>iii</sup> Reinhold Hanisch, *I was Hitlers Buddy*. In : *The New Republic*, April 5, 1939